

# Choice Words

*How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*

PETER H. JOHNSTON

*Foreword by Richard Allington*





In productive classrooms, teachers don't just teach children skills: they build emotionally and relationally healthy learning communities. Teachers create intellectual environments that produce not only technically competent students, but also caring, secure, actively literate human beings.

*Choice Words* shows how teachers accomplish this using their most powerful teaching tool: language. Throughout, Peter Johnston provides examples of apparently ordinary words, phrases, and uses of language that are pivotal in the orchestration of the classroom. Grounded in a study by accomplished literacy teachers, the book demonstrates how the things we say (and don't say) have surprising consequences for what children learn and for who they become as literate people. Through language, children learn how to become strategic thinkers, not merely how to use literacy strategies. In addition, Johnston examines the complex learning that teachers produce in classrooms that is hard to name and thus is not recognized by tests, by policy-makers, by the general public, and often by teachers themselves, yet is vitally important.

This book will be enlightening for any teacher who wishes to be more conscious of the many ways their language helps children acquire literacy skills and view the world, their peers, and themselves in new ways.



**Peter H. Johnston** (Ph.D. University of Illinois) is Professor of Education and Chair of the Reading Department at State University of New York at Albany. His position as an advocate for teachers and children developed from his early career teaching primary school in his native New Zealand. He is a recipient of the Albert J. Harris Award for his contribution to the understanding of reading disability and was chair of the IRA/NCTE Joint Task Force on Assessment. His many publications include *Knowing Literacy: Constructive Literacy Assessment* (Stenhouse 1997) and *Running Records: A Self-Tutoring Guide* (Stenhouse 2000). Peter's continuing interest is in literacy assessment as it relates to democratic society.



**Stenhouse Publishers**  
Portland, Maine  
[www.stenhouse.com](http://www.stenhouse.com)

ISBN 1 57110 389 9



90000

9 781571 103895

# Contents

<i>Foreword by Richard Allington</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xi</i>
Chapter 1 The Language of Influence in Teaching	1
Chapter 2 Noticing and Naming	11
Chapter 3 Identity	22
Chapter 4 Agency and Becoming Strategic	29
Chapter 5 Flexibility and Transfer (or Generalizing)	43
Chapter 6 Knowing	53
Chapter 7 An Evolutionary, Democratic Learning Community	64
Chapter 8 Who Do You Think You're Talking To?	76
<i>Appendix A: The Fine Print</i>	<i>87</i>
<i>Appendix B: Four Fourth Graders</i>	<i>92</i>
<i>Appendix C: Analysis of Debbie Miller's Interaction with the Class and Brendan</i>	<i>97</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>99</i>